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Countdown to the convention

Pioneer Press

Article Last Updated: 05/27/2008 05:49:07 PM CDT

St. Paul may be the deep blue center of a solidly blue county in a mostly blue state. But it will welcome the Red Staters for the Republican National Convention Sept. 1-4 with the charm and grace of perfect party hosts.

Mayors Chris Coleman of St. Paul and R.T. Rybak of Minneapolis, along with Cynthia Leshar, president of the convention's host committee, are taking that message to Washington, D.C., today. The Repubs will be upon us before we know it — fewer than 100 days remain before the convention begins at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.

We could grouse about the fact that the New York Times persists in locating the convention in Minneapolis — it did so again on its editorial page Monday — when in fact the nomination of Sen. John McCain as the party's presidential candidate will take place in St. Paul.

Nor will we dwell on the fact that Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the Minnesota Legislature failed to agree on funding for a letter of credit the state promised in order to secure the convention.

None of that — we've got our party-host face on, and we're focusing on the positives.

Coleman, Rybak and Leshar are zeroing in on long-term benefits to the Twin Cities. The idea is that tens of thousands of people will be here for the first time and will be so bowled over that they will want to

come back to visit, start a business, enroll their child in a Minnesota college or invest in an ice shanty on Lake Mille Lacs.

"We've been a well-kept secret," said Leshar. "We're no longer going to be flyover country."

But having a national convention is more than a public-relations opportunity. It's an honor for those of us who enjoy the spectacle of democracy. We enjoy Wolf Blitzer sightings and tales of the Google after-convention party as much as anyone else, but the serious business of American politics is what makes this a great event.

We love politics here. We vote in large numbers. We argue, we dispute, we call talk-radio. We even watch the Legislature on cable television. We write letters to the editor and string emotional comments at the end of online political stories. Minnesota tends to vote blue, as in Democratic, but we are less dependably Democratic than before. Hennepin and Ramsey counties voted overwhelmingly for Democrat John Kerry in 2004, but the five suburban metro counties supported President Bush.

To tap this grass-roots interest, it is important to have events for people who are not wealthy or credentialed or famous. Average folks need some way to get closer to the action than their television set. CivicFest, a historical exhibit on the nation and the presidency at the Minneapolis Convention Center, will be one such event. Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$10 for children.

Another way to get closer to the action is to volunteer to help greet and direct visitors during the convention. Leshar said 3,000 people have signed up, but she is hoping for 8,000 to 10,000. Go to the group's Web site at www.msp2008.com to join the party.

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This isn't about how we vote. It's about a country we all care about. We're fired up that the Republican Party chose our community for its national convention. We'll do everything we can to make them happy and comfortable.

We might even invite them back in January to check out the ice-fishing.

Negotiation by other means

Having been skunked at home, the University of Minnesota has taken its fight against light rail on Washington Avenue to Washington, D.C. The university has been raising questions and concerns with the Federal Transit Administration, the agency that passes judgment on transit projects to decide whether they're worthy of federal tax money. The U contends there's no need to rush a choice on a route for the Central Corridor.

But Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell has argued that if the Central Corridor project is to remain in line for federal tax money — half the project's cost — the FTA timetable is indeed strict. All the other partners in the Central Corridor light-rail project, including Ramsey County, Hennepin County, St. Paul, Minneapolis and the Metropolitan Council, see expensive, unproductive delay in the U's insistence on forcing further study of a different route that seems to offer little promise, the so-called "northern alignment" through Dinkytown.

The Metropolitan Council is scheduled to vote today on a preferred route. Everyone involved has expressed respect for the university's concerns and taken pains to address them. We don't begrudge U officials their advocacy on behalf of our fine state university.

But no route will be perfect, and nobody gets everything he or she wants. The route before the

council today, which includes a pedestrian and transit mall along Washington Avenue on campus, does not satisfy everyone. But it's the best plan by far, and no amount of delay or study will change that.

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